

Briefing, Rebriefing, Debriefing: Learning to labour in a policy ministry

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‘Writing from experience about experience – our own and others’ - is a necessarily a messy business. It involves an inside-out approach in which we attempt to make sense of what we do; it involves frequently rather subjective evaluations, the difficult interplay between the individual and the collective and the relation between group practice and the broader social context in which that practice takes place’. (Ireland, 1996:130)

From teacher to learner – a debriefing

Between late June and late November I worked as a policy advisor in the Ministry of Research, Science & Technology. I responded to the opportunity for a secondment in that environment because I wanted to learn more about how government agencies work and about the process of policy advice, but I did not give much thought to how I would do that learning. This paper attends to how I learnt through experience in that environment, rather than to what I learnt. My focus is on the processes involved in that learning and the objects in which that learning was ‘congealed,’ and not on particular policies (despite its location in the policy/politics stream). I embark on this discussion from a variety of different positions. I am both the insider/participant engaged in learning (who certainly wanted to ‘succeed’ in the tasks of the advisor), and an outsider/academic who, in other contexts, is responsible for the learning of others. As a sociologist, I am also interested in the construction of identities through organisational practice and the ways in which (in a variety of contexts) what appear to be individual products are the outcome of collective practices.

One of the most liberating things about being located in the contradictory position of being technically ‘a senior advisor’, but also a very inexperienced public servant, was that I had to acknowledge day-by-day what I didn’t know. I did not want to make others responsible for my learning, but I did have to seek a lot of advice and enter into mentoring relationships that paralleled the relationships that I have with students in an academic environment. In the context of the policy ministry, I was the one whose

learning was facilitated and who needed to receive regular feedback on my written work. This was illustrated very starkly by a particular briefing for the Minister of Research, Science & Technology that I drafted and redrafted on and off for well over a month. (Other than the briefings prepared to incoming Ministers, most briefings are written in a few days – begun early in the week and sent up to the Minister’s office at the end of the week. While the briefings may be written relatively quickly, they often build on work in particular areas completed over several weeks or even months).

This paper is, at least in part, an attempt to debrief about the process of briefing and rebriefing that I engaged in over that period of time. The activity of writing that brief, the social relationships that were part of its construction, and the reworking of the briefing as a material artefact, illustrate some of the collective aspects of labour and learning in a policy ministry. As an academic ‘conceit’ I use two pieces of very different academic writing to ‘frame’ this autobiographical discussion – Paul Willis’s classic ethnography, *Learning to Labour: How working class kids get working class jobs* (1977) and Etienne Wenger’s *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* (1998).

Briefing and rebriefing

A Ministerial briefing is an artful practice that interweaves the conventional and the unique. It is an activity that produces an artefact that is a product of social relationships as well as ‘facts’ and ‘arguments’. It is a product that uses language in particular ways, and has a format that is simultaneously specific to particular agencies, and generic to the public service briefing. It is ideally a ‘brief’ document of 2-3 pages that may be followed by a more detailed paper.

Briefings are the tools through which officials communicate with Ministers and get items for discussion on the agenda of meetings between officials and Ministers and meetings between Ministers. Officials and Ministers sign the briefings as individuals, but the communication involved is far more collective than the paper trace would suggest. In MoRST at least, briefings are likely to be peer reviewed by at least one other member of the Ministry. They are checked by senior managers; their formatting consolidated by administrative staff and then made available to others in the Ministry via the intranet.

A briefing begins with a two to three point summary, provides a background to the issue/policy initiative/regulation that is the focus of the briefing, and then presents the Minister with possible forms of action, including the possibility of no action. It concludes with a summary of the advice and a statement about what the Minister might want to do, or authorise officials to do. A successful briefing will create opportunities for the Minister to do something that is consistent with the overall focus of the Vote for which s/he is responsible. The model of social life assumed in a Ministerial briefing tends to be shaped by causal models. There is attention to ‘drivers’ – the factors that produce observable effects. A briefing will also include problem definition, analysis of the sources of the problem, and evidence relating to the options for action presented in the brief.

Briefings, in various ways, are both attempts to ‘second guess’ what Ministers might want to do in particular fields and to present compelling arguments for particular directions. They must be written clearly and simply – ‘in the language of the 12 year old’ as a Minister pointed out to me – but are also likely spark Ministerial interest and action when they demonstrate sophisticated connections between the actions proposed and other policies that are receiving attention by the government.

Briefings often present Ministers with opportunities to constitute themselves as active agents, as political actors who do things, or facilitate action by others. They provide the Minister with narrative opportunities – with possibilities of telling certain stories about themselves. At another level, they are the mechanisms through which public servants create agency for themselves. Briefings are the means whereby they secure opportunities for their action as officials. And it is through these actions that they constitute their identity and the identity of their government.

Making connections – ‘learning to labour’

What are the processes involved in the activity of ‘briefing’? How did I learn through the experience of engagement in these processes? And what were the implications for my identity as I ‘learned to labour’ in a policy ministry? The phrase ‘learning to labour’ seemed a compelling way to describe my experience when I started to think about this presentation, but are there any connections between Paul Willis’s 1977

ethnography, *Learning to Labour*, and my experience of learning by experience in a policy ministry? Willis explored how the cultural resistance of working class boys (or 'lads') to the regimes of a Midlands high school consolidation of their position in a gendered and class differentiated labour market. How can this classic example of Birmingham School Cultural Studies possibly be relevant to the middle class labour market of a New Zealand policy ministry?

While the disjunctions between 'the lads'' experiences at a UK secondary modern school in the early 1970s and my learning in a New Zealand policy ministry thirty years later may be stark, there are some overlapping agendas. These relate particularly to Willis' interest in the culture of organisations and how that culture contributes to certain material outcomes for the young men in his study. Willis' 'lads' are self conscious and reflexive in their construction of a resistant working class identity. Willis also attends to all the small details through which these identity actions are constructed (the overt smoking at the gate, the absence from class, the verbal challenges to teachers, the styles of dress). Willis and I share an interest in how microprocesses in organisations and small groups create and sustain a differentiated social life. We are both interested in how what is done constructs who we are.

Etienne Wenger (1998: 4) argues that participation refers, not just to engagement in particular activities, but the process of participating in the *practices* of certain social communities. These processes or actions are the ways through which identities are constructed – including the identity of 'policy advisor'. He argues that: 'Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do' (Wenger, 1998: 4). This process of identity construction both occurred, and at times was subverted, during my period of secondment at MoRST. Because I was there in a temporary capacity, I sustained my identity as 'the academic', even when I was engaging in the practices of an official. On one occasion a Minister explicitly asked me to comment 'as practising academic'. This facilitated my opportunity to contribute to the discussion from a different position, but also marked my difference as 'outsider'. This differentiation was marked in other ways as well, including staying on in the evenings to complete the academic work that continued to absorb my time during the secondment.

Learning to labour in this context involved managing multiple identities in a new context. Policy advisors are not constituted as advocates for particular communities of interest. Their job is not to ‘urge’ or convince the Minister, but to construct opportunities for them to achieve various goals. As a RS&T policy agency, MoRST must distinguish itself from ‘purchase agents’ like the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology, the Royal Society of New Zealand and the Health Research Council, and from ‘providers’, whether they are located in the private sector or tertiary education institutions. As a provider of tertiary education and research, and as someone who in another context is charged with advancing the interests of social science research, I was potentially easily constituted as ‘stakeholder’ and advocate rather than advisor. These issues were all the more pertinent as the details the new regime of the tertiary sector were being worked out. MoRST, as an agency with oversight with respect to research, was inevitably one of the agencies involved in these developments.

MoRST’s decision to give me the opportunity of a secondment against the background of these multiple locations meant that I could access the perspectives of those who respond to social science and academic advocacy. It challenged me to imaginatively occupy the positions of those whose job was to be sceptical about the arguments of advocates. That I had engaged in this learning (for better or for worse), was highlighted for me when I had a conversation with someone from another agency and found myself rehearsing the ways in which other policy advisors in my agency might respond to these arguments.

Learning through experience and ‘communities of practice’

My experience of learning in a policy ministry and my interest in attending to the processes through which that learning occurred are consistent with what Etienne Wenger and others have referred to as ‘communities of practice’. This work on learning challenges the assumption that learning is an individual process. Wenger (1998) argues that learning is a relational and interactive process that involves acquiring competences with respect to particular valued activities including the writing of the Ministerial briefing. It was through participation in the construction of this particular cultural product that I could become an ‘advisor’.

Wenger (1998: 58) uses ‘reification’ to refer to ‘the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into “thingness”’. The various versions of a particular ‘briefing’ I produced for the Minister, as I ‘laboured’ in October and early November, were reifications of the relationships and interactions I had with people both inside and outside the particular agency in which I was located.

The object itself was a collective product, not just because it incorporated ideas and information from others, but because it included words, phrases and suggestions for possible action that emerged interactively. It was also jointly written, although it was eventually presented under my name. Numerous people in the Ministry of Research, Science & Technology had reframed the original sentences, modified the headings, suggested deletions and additions before it eventually went figuratively and literally ‘up’ to the Minister. The people involved ranged from more junior advisors to principal advisors, managers and the chief executive. The ways in which government agencies are constituted as collectively responsible to the Minister provided the organisational context in which this advice to me, on my advice, occurred. While I might be personally responsible for the briefing, the activity of briefing the Minister involved assuming a collectively constituted role of speaking for or being the spokesperson of the ministry.

MoRST officials’ commitment to my learning through experience also meant that people sat down with me and led me through alternative ways of approaching what I was doing. These interactions were always of the form ‘you could say this’ or ‘I’d frame it this way’, rather than explicit instructions to do things differently. In some ways the advice to me was similar to the advice given to the Minister – this is what you could do, it could have this impact or effect. Through this focus on the artefact of the ‘briefing’, I had access to some of the analytic logic that experienced advisors brought to their practice. Tacit knowledge was transferred by this process of interactively working together just thesis supervisors share knowledge with graduate students in ways that arise out of their practice of research and writing rather than didactically. Much of the pleasure for me of working in MoRST was that in this context I was the student.

The social relationships in which this learning occurred were facilitated by a range of practices that actively constructed collegiality. There were weekly ‘all staff’ meetings, and each of the separate groups within the Ministry met for about an hour once a week. On Friday mornings, large numbers of staff would gather with their tea and coffee at one of the tables to consume muffins and talk, and on Friday evenings the social club would organise drinks and chippies on another part of the 10th floor of the Reserve Bank Building. ‘Advice about advice’ in this agency was embedded in the sociability practiced in contexts in which talk about movies, weekend activities, children, home-improvement, useful internet sites, holidays, clubbing and work were combined. People’s capacities for informal learning and trust, including my own, were forged through the opportunities provided by these social occasions. They also cut across the formal status hierarchies of the public service. In this way MoRST constituted itself as a learning institution.

Relational and situated identities

In their discussion of ethnographic studies of apprenticeship, Wenger and Lave argue that ‘learning as participation’ involves attention to action, but also ‘engagement in culture and history’ (Wenger, 1998: 13). Attention to action and to ‘engagement’ in the construction of culture and identity are also key issues for Willis in *Learning to Labour*. Both Wenger and Willis are acutely sensitive to the way in which the experience of subjectivity or self-consciousness about identity is relational and interactive. They are also both committed to exploring how people engage in discursive practices that constitute themselves as agents within contexts that are inevitably rule bound and sometimes experienced as oppressive and constraining.

Wenger argues that social learning theory involves attention to meaning, practice, community and identity – all of which are components of the activities he refers to as ‘community of practice’. These are the things that we do with others to ‘get jobs done’ in a variety of different contexts (Wenger, 1998: 6). The things that we learn through this process of doing are not easily written down; they are implicit rather than explicit – but they make the world work in various ways. These are the things that Paul Willis sought to make explicit in *Learning to Labour* – the processes whereby boys actively resisted ‘learning’ in school, and the power of the class system, and at

the same time consolidated their conventional position as male manual workers and potential 'breadwinners'.

Wenger, like Paul Willis, argues that learning occurs through active participation in social communities. My work at MoRST involved engaging in a number of different communities. One of these was a Science group at MoRST, one of five key divisions in this small ministry (Science, Policy, Strategy, Corporate, Knowledge Centre) that responded in different ways to aspects of MoRST's brief as a policy ministry. I was also engaged in activities that combined the work of officials in MoRST, Creative NZ, Industry NZ and Culture and Heritage. Other work involved connections with research units and policy advisors in Social Development, Education, Te Puni Kokori, Justice, Women's Affairs and Pacific Island Affairs. Within MoRST I was the academic on secondment, learning through practice to be the policy advisor, including the practice of writing briefings. Outside MoRST, I was the representative of the Ministry, called upon to think represent the position of the Ministry. Some of the people with whom I interacted in that capacity only knew me as a MoRST representative; others responded to me as someone who was multiply positioned as a consequence the secondment.

As an official sitting in on meetings of the Working Group discussing the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) and contributing to the development of documents associated with the design of that fund, I was not located as someone who represented sociologists or social scientists, or even academics, but as an official with an interest the relationship between the design of the fund and the research, science and technology system. I was also engaged in the briefing and rebriefing of others in the Ministry who were thinking strategically about the RS&T system against the background of tertiary education reform generally and the PBRF in particular. The activity of these interactions, these briefings and debriefings, following meetings with the PBRF Working Group and officials from other ministries repositioned me as an actor in this sector.

And finally, what did I learn?

My experience of being constituted as a learner in a policy ministry reinforced an existing commitment to the importance of learning through doing rather than through telling people how to do things. I learnt most through experiencing the way in which accomplished advisors accessed tacit knowledge to reframe the way I framed or failed to frame problems. I became familiar with a range of relevant languages about outputs and outcomes, drivers, capacities and capabilities by constructing and rewriting briefings and discussion papers. I learnt a bit about the delicate art of positioning suggestions for action in time frames that might be appropriate for Budget planning. I found that I had much to learn about turning analysis of problems into alternative courses of action.

In interaction with Ministers I also learnt about the capacity of very busy people to pose challenging questions, deal sceptically with the language in which advice is clothed, and challenge officials to clarify the issues and the potential outcomes of certain actions. I also learnt that while officials can sometimes anticipate Ministerial responses, they are not infallible judges of this. While officials may work to provide the ‘successful’ briefing, it is the possibility of being wrong that adds to the interest of the job and that keeps officials on their toes, always aware that the exercise of Ministerial scepticism is a necessary protection for all citizens against governance by bureaucrats.

While I was working at MoRST, one of the doctoral students I was supervising completed a thesis that examined how women learnt ‘from experience’ in a Women’s Refuge. Lesley MacGibbon’s followed a group of trainee advocates as they prepared to work for Refuge. Her participants used their interactions with her to ‘debrief’ about their experiences as trainees in this voluntary organisation. She discusses the value of volunteering for volunteers, particularly the value of ‘trying on’ alternative forms of subjectivity - ways of reframing that complex construction we call ‘self’. While I learnt a lot of different things through this secondment, this was possibly the most valuable aspect of my experience, being positioned in ways that challenged me to ‘try on’ new ways of seeing myself, including the value of being a learner rather than a mentor and an apprentice rather than a teacher.

References

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